

Opening Remarks at the
IDRC Speakers Series Presentation by

Rory Stewart

on

Afghanistan's democratic development

The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
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Maureen O'Neil
President, International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

Good evening.

It is my great pleasure to welcome Rory Stewart back to Ottawa and to welcome all of you to the first in a Speaker Series on the theme of democratic development hosted by the International Development Research Centre.

Bonsoir. C'est pour moi un grand plaisir d'accueillir de nouveau Rory Stewart à Ottawa et de vous souhaiter la bienvenue à la toute première séance de la série des Conférences du CRDI ayant pour thème le développement démocratique.

Mr. Stewart visited IDRC's head office in April and treated us to a fascinating presentation on Afghanistan, which many hundreds of people have since listened to on our website. He is a knowledgeable and articulate informant on Afghanistan, in all its complexities, and I'm sure we can look forward to another deeply thoughtful talk from him tonight.

Mr. Stewart has already packed several illustrious careers into his life, as well as many millions of footsteps. In 2000, he set off on a solitary walk of 10,000 kilometres across several Asian countries, including Pakistan, Iran, India, and Nepal. His first book, *The Places in Between*, is a compelling account of his intrepid mid-winter trek across Afghanistan in 2002, shortly after the fall of the Taliban. The *New York Times* named it one of last year's 10 best books, and one reviewer wrote: "Thank goodness for brave people doing crazy things." Some villagers opened their homes to Mr. Stewart, while others set their dogs on him. I think we can count on him to be candid and to offer provocative opinions here this evening, but we would, of course, like to extend to him a welcome of the warmest kind.

It is clearly deep in Mr. Stewart's nature to want to venture beyond secure zones, to go in search of the truth on the ground and to see things the way they really are at the village level. He estimates that he stayed in 500 village homes during his walk across Asia. It is his careful attention to small, unhurried encounters such as these that makes his writing so evocative and authentic.

Mr. Stewart was born in Hong Kong, and grew up in Scotland and Malaysia. He served for a year in the British army before earning two degrees at Oxford University. He then joined the British Foreign Office and took up diplomatic posts in Indonesia and Montenegro. He has lived for 10 years in Islamic countries, and many of those years have been spent in or near war zones.

A few months after the Coalition forces entered Iraq in 2003, Mr. Stewart, at the age of 30, was appointed deputy governor of two provinces in the troubled marsh regions in the south of the country. His second book, *The Prince of the Marshes: And Other Occupational Hazards of a Year in Iraq*, chronicles his time spent resolving disputes between rival factions, negotiating hostage releases, holding elections, and generally trying to establish a functional government in a fragile region.

At the end of Mr. Stewart's stint in Iraq, a man who had tried to kill him in a sustained mortar attack urged him not to take it personally, and hailed him as a hard worker who would be missed by all. In 2004, the British government also recognized Mr. Stewart's efforts and awarded him an Order of the British Empire.

Mr. Stewart now lives in Kabul where he runs the Turquoise Mountain Foundation. The charity is working to restore the historic centre of the city and to revitalize communities by providing vocational training in traditional Afghan crafts and skills.

Mr. Stewart told a journalist recently: "You have to start with how things actually are and work from there." This pragmatic philosophy resonates with IDRC's own approach as it supports research that responds to local needs and priorities in developing countries. Our current work in Afghanistan is underpinned by IDRC's 37 years of research partnerships and experience in post-conflict peacebuilding. And in the firm belief that research can foster democratic development, we are also exploring new programming possibilities there.

With our Speaker Series, we at IDRC aim to give a platform to renowned experts who have much to say on issues of social justice and international development. Without endorsing the views of any speaker, we want to provide a space for debate on these issues. Economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and M.S. Swaminathan, the father of the Green Revolution in India, were previous guests in our Speaker Series.

Tonight we are launching a special six-month-long focus on building democracies in developing countries, which will also consider the role of the international community in that effort. Forthcoming speakers will include the former president of Chile, Ricardo Lagos, and Kenyan anti-corruption campaigner John Githongo.

And now, as part of our ongoing exploration of the democratic development theme, please join me in welcoming Mr. Stewart. After his talk on “Policy Ethics and Failure – Afghanistan,” we will have time for a question and answer session. Mr. Stewart will then be on hand to sign copies of his books. Tonight’s event will also be available as a podcast on the IDRC website.

I turn the podium over to you Mr. Stewart... À vous, M. Stewart.

CLOSING THANKS

Thank you very much, Mr. Stewart, for sharing your unique perspectives and strongly felt views on a country that is much in the news but little understood.

Thank you.